California's WaterFix was always a dangerous deal. Now the Trump administration is making it worse

Wesselman, Eric; Wright, Robert . Los Angeles Times (Online) , Los Angeles: Los Angeles Times Communications LLC. Sep 7, 2018.

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FULL TEXT

There are many reasons to oppose the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta water tunnels project, now called the California WaterFix. The Trump administration has just added a few more.

The WaterFix is the most controversial and expensive water project in California history. It would install two huge tunnels, at a cost of at least $20 billion, revamping the way the state diverts water from the Sacramento River and the delta to farms and cities to the south. The earlier "peripheral canal" version of this project was voted down in a statewide referendum by a 2-to-1 margin in 1982.

The size of the tunnels could allow for massive water diversions that would further degrade the already impaired San Francisco Bay-Delta Estuary. WaterFix supporters, including the Metropolitan Water District in Southern California, suggest that federal and state environmental laws, and state water regulations, could provide assurances that such extreme diversions couldn't happen. But actions by Congress and the administration dramatically illustrate why there can be no such assurances.

The Trump administration is trying to dictate California's water policy with zero regard for state's rights or the Golden State's iconic rivers, lakes and estuaries. The latest attack is Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke's late August demand for a federal plan to get around state policies in order to increase water deliveries to irrigation districts south of the delta.

The tunnels would only make such machinations easier. With the technical capacity to carry 15,000 cubic feet of water per second, they could divert the typical summer flow of the entire Sacramento River, California's largest river. Even much less extreme diversions could mean the death of the delta and the bay estuary.

Congress has simultaneously declared its own war against California state water law and environmental protection. The House of Representatives recently passed legislation that would exempt the tunnels, the federally funded Central Valley Water Project and other state water projects from federal or state judicial review.

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Until recently, it was unthinkable that a secretary of the Interior would seek to override the California State Water Resources Control Board in making decisions about allocations and protections of California waters. Until recently, it was unthinkable that Congress would attempt to eliminate judicial review under not only federal, but also California environmental protection laws of the state's own public works projects.

With climate change fueling more severe and prolonged droughts, pressure for such federal intrusion is likely to grow. The future may well bring even more extreme efforts to maximize water exports to the powerful and eliminate the ability of the state to protect the public interest.

The construction and operation of the WaterFix tunnels will harm and could destroy the delta and Northern California's water resources. Washington's actions show how meaningless assurances to the contrary are. The only effective way to truly protect the delta is for the next governor to halt the tunnel plan.

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conservation group headquartered in Sacramento.

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DETAILS

Subject:	Judicial reviews; Environmental protection; Rivers
Location:	San Francisco Bay Sacramento California Southern California Sacramento River Central Valley Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Northern California California
People:	Zinke, Ryan
Company / organization:	Name: Los Angeles Times; NAICS: 511110; Name: Twitter Inc; NAICS: 519130; Name: Congress; NAICS: 921120; Name: House of Representatives; NAICS: 921120; Name: Facebook Inc; NAICS: 518210, 519130
Publication title:	Los Angeles Times (Online); Los Angeles
Publication year:	2018
Publication date:	Sep 7, 2018
Section:	Opinion - Op Ed
Publisher:	Los Angeles Times Communications LLC
Place of publication:	Los Angeles
Country of publication:	United States, Los Angeles
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
Source type:	Blogs, Podcasts, &Websites
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Opinions
ProQuest document ID:	2100884099
Document URL:	https://search.proquest.com/docview/2100884099?accountid=14512
Copyright:	Copyright Tribune Interactive, LLC Sep 7, 2018
Last updated:	2018-09-08
Database:	Los Angeles Times

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